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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of parental marriage quality on two aspects of self-esteem in their adolescent children, mediated by parent-adolescent relationship quality. Participating in the study were mothers, fathers, and 16- to 18-year-olds from 54 intact families. The first assessment was completed before the adolescents left middle school, and the second, 3 to 4 months later after their transition into an apprenticeship program or to further schooling. The quality of marital and parent-adolescent relationships was assessed as well as adolescents' self-satisfaction as rated by all family members and adolescents' global familial competence. The findings indicated that the self-concept variables correlated with marital quality. These correlations were mediated by parent-adolescent relationships. Longitudinal analyses tentatively confirmed that adolescents' self-concept was influenced by quality of marital and parent-adolescent relationships. During the school-to-work transition, self-satisfaction apparently underwent a shift from an influence by parents' approval to a prediction by fathers' guidance. Familial competence, however, was constantly influenced by all measures of relationship satisfaction. Marital quality seemed to be especially relevant for fathers' attitudes and behaviors. (Contains 12 references.) (KB)

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J. Gowert Masche

Poster paper presented at the Eighth SRA Biennial Meeting, Chicago, IL, March 30-April 2, 2000

## Abstract

In 54 intact families with children (age 16-18) who left school between two waves of data collections, quality of marital and parent-adolescent relationships were assessed as well as adolescents' self-concept, namely self-satisfaction as rated by all family members, and adolescents' global familial competence. The self-concept variables correlated with marital quality. These correlations were mediated by parent-adolescent relationships. Longitudinal analyses tentatively confirmed that adolescents' self-concept was influenced by quality of marital and parent-adolescent relationships. During school-to-work transition, self-satisfaction apparently underwent a shift from an influence by parents' approval to a prediction by fathers guidance. Familial competence, however, constantly was influenced by all measures of relationship satisfaction. Marital quality seemed to be especially relevant for fathers' attitudes and behaviors.

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INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY
Department of Differential and Developmental Psychology

# Does a Happy Marriage Make Positive Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Self-Satisfied Children?

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## Summary

In 54 intact families with children (age 16-18) who left school between two waves of data collections, quality of marital and parent-adolescent relationships were assessed as well as adolescents' self-concept, namely self-satisfaction as rated by all family members, and adolescents' global familial competence. The self-concept variables correlated with marital quality. These correlations were mediated by parent-adolescent relationships. Longitudinal analyses tentatively confirmed that adolescents' self-concept was influenced by quality of marital and parent-adolescent relationships. During school-to-work transition, self-satisfaction apparently underwent a shift from an influence by parents' approval to a prediction by fathers guidance. Familial competence, however, constantly was influenced by all measures of relationship satisfaction. Marital quality seemed to be especially relevant for fathers' attitudes and behaviors.

## Aim of the Study

Does marriage quality influence adolescents' self-esteem? One may not assume that watching unpleasant marriages directly leads to low self-esteem in adolescents. But if parents don't get along with each other well, they may be too occupied with themselves to be reliable confidants for their children and they may tend to triangulation or to transgressions of intergenerational boundaries. These and other reasons derived from learning or trait theories would cause impaired parent-adolescent relationships which in turn may lead to low self-esteem. In other words, I expect an effect of marital quality on adolescents' self-esteem, mediated by variables of parent-adolescent relationship. Mediation is more than an indirect effect of A to B and of B to C. Mediation first of all means that there is an effect of A to C and that this effect disappears if B is included into the statistical equations.

- **Relationship marriage/self-esteem:** Confirmed by Matteson (1974), Smith & Forehand (1986, concerning depression that may be related to low self-esteem)
- **Relationship marriage/parent-adolescent relationship:** Confirmed by Barber (1990), Steinberg & Silverberg (1987), not confirmed by Ho et al. (1995)
- **Relationship parent-adolescent relationship/self-esteem:** Confirmed by Ho et al. (1995), Matteson (1974), Smith & Forehand (1986, concerning depression); mixed results by Barber (1990).

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- **Disappearing relationship marriage/self-esteem when parent-adolescent relationships in equations:** Mixed results by Barber (1990).

Thus, there is evidence for the postulated relationship, but results are somewhat mixed, due to different self-esteem measures and – in the Ho et al. study – marriage happiness measured by only two items. In addition, none of the studies cited did test the postulated mediation of effects in full. One study went beyond them: Cole and McPherson (1993) found that influences of marital relationships on adolescents' depressive mood were mediated by the quality of parent-adolescent relationship. However, unlike the present study, Cole and McPherson did not take into account that divergent views of two partners in a dyadic relationship are not only due to "lack of validity" but rather may reflect different experiences in the "same" relationship. In addition, depressive mood can be considered to be related to low self-esteem but is obviously not the same. **This is the first study that tests whether marital relationship quality has effects on two aspects of adolescent self-esteem, mediated by parent-adolescent relationship quality. In addition, parent-adolescent relationships and one of the two self-esteem measures are taken from adolescents and parents. All relationship measures include free oral descriptions and written questionnaires.**

## Method

### Longitudinal sample

54 mothers, fathers, and adolescents (age 16-18) from intact families.

First investigation before leaving middle school.

Second investigation 3-4 months later, after transition into an apprenticeship or to further school.

### Measures

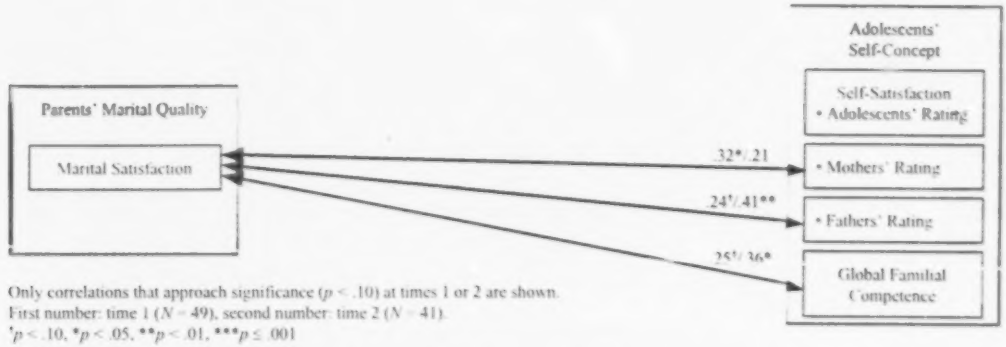
| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Relationship Satisfaction Scale<br>(Masche, 1999a, derived from Family Adaptability Measure, Skinner et al., 1983, and Dependability and Emotional Hesitancy Scales, Kreppner, 1995)<br>Partnership Questionnaire<br>(Hahlweg et al., 1992)<br>Five Minutes Speech Samples<br>(free oral descriptions of relationships)<br>(Leeb et al., 1991)<br>⇒ **General factor: Marital Satisfaction** | Relationship Satisfaction Scale<br>Discussion of Critical Issues<br>(Kreppner, 1995)<br>Five Minutes Speech Samples<br>⇒ **Four factors: Parents' Satisfaction, Adolescents' Satisfaction With Mother, Parent-Adolescent Discussions, Adolescents' Satisfaction With Father** | **Adolescents' Self-Satisfaction**<br>(10-point scale) rated by<br>• **Adolescents,**<br>• **Mothers,**<br>• **Fathers.**<br><br>General factor of adolescents' Family Adaptability Measure self-rating scales.<br>Here referred to as **Global Familial Competence** |

## Results

In order to confirm that the quality of parents' marriage has an influence on the self-concept of the adolescent child, and that this influence is mediated by the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, there is to show:

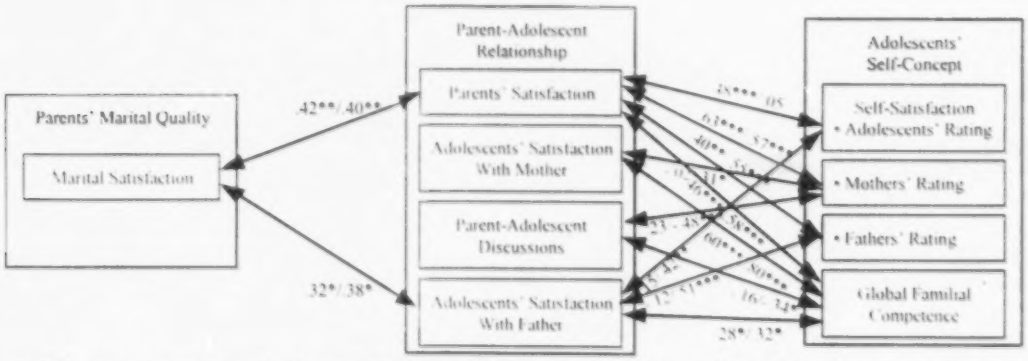
(a) Marriage quality and adolescents' self-concept are correlated,
(b) Parent-adolescent relationships are correlated both with marriage quality and adolescents' self-concept,
(c) The relationship between marriage quality and adolescents' self-concept variables disappears when self-concept simultaneously is explained by parent-adolescent relationship.

In the following, these three postulations are confirmed. In addition, I try to show that the predictors of time 1 predict the change of the outcome from time 1 to time 2, lending support to a causal interpretation.




Only correlations that approach significance ($p < .10$) at times 1 or 2 are shown.
First number: time 1 ($N = 49$), second number: time 2 ($N = 41$).
$^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p \leq .001$

*Correlations between marital quality and adolescents' self-concept...*




*...and between parent-adolescent relationships and marital quality as well as adolescents' self-concept*

As can be seen, the first two requirements of a mediation are met: Predictor, outcome, and the mediating variables are correlated. The mediation occurs via parental satisfaction and adolescents' satisfaction with relationship towards father.

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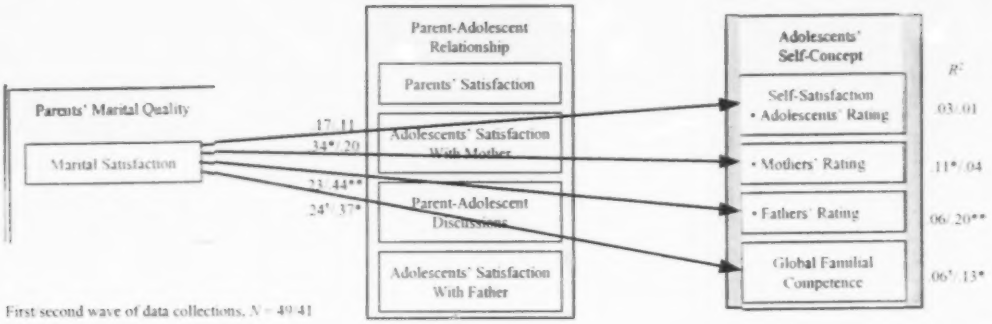
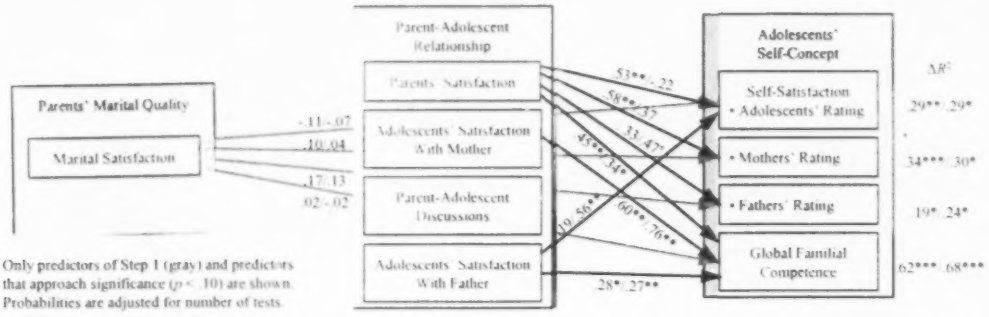



*Hierarchical regressions, Step 1: Marital satisfaction explains part of adolescents' self-concept.*




*Hierarchical regressions, Step 2: Influence of marital satisfaction on adolescents' self-concept explained by parent-adolescent relationship.*

**Thus,** also the third requirement is met: The **influence of marital quality on adolescents' self-concept is** not direct but **mediated by parent-adolescent relationship.**

## Longitudinal Analyses

So far, the analyses employed data from one point in time only. Thus, causality is not completely clear. In order to prove that indeed marital quality influences adolescents' self-concept via parent-adolescent relationship, hierarchical regression analyses were computed. It is not sufficient, simply to test whether marital quality at time 1 correlates with adolescents' self-concept at time 2, because both variables may be quite stable. Instead, I try to predict residual change. When self-concept at time 2 serves as dependent variables, after introducing self-concept at time 1 into the regression equation, marital quality and parent-adolescent relationship at time 1 should explain additional proportions of variance. This is a very conservative test of causality as it implies that these predictors influence adolescents' self-concept with a delay of at least 3-4 months. Furthermore, it requires some change in these predictors before time 1. Else, adolescents' self-concept would have adapted to the levels of the predictors, and no further change was to be expected. For these reasons, the predictors at time 2 were introduced into the regression equations, too, allowing to find out whether changes in the predictors are accompanied by changes in adolescents' self-concept.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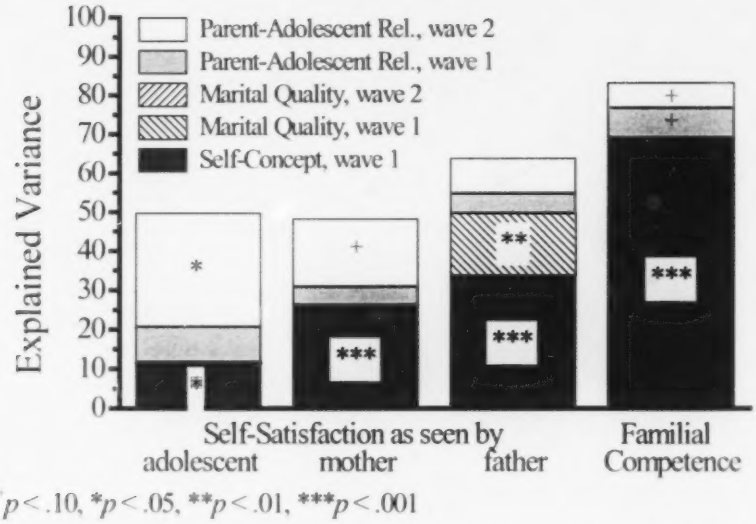


*Unique variance explained by steps of hierarchical regressions predicting self-concept at time 2*

Fathers assessed an increase in adolescents' self-satisfaction if the parents had a positive marital relationship at time 1. However, no additional influences of marital quality from time 1 to time 2 were found. Although the self-concept variables mostly proved to be stable and hence only to a little degree were subject to change, parent-adolescent relationship quality at time 1 tentatively influenced change in adolescents' self-concept. Self-concept changes were, however, most strongly related to changes in parent-adolescent relationships.

## Discussion

- **As hypothesized, parents' marital satisfaction correlated with adolescents' self-concept measures. These correlations were mediated by the quality of parent-adolescent relationship.**
- The **self-assessed self-satisfaction of the adolescents** was influenced by parents' satisfaction with the relationships to them at time 1, but at time 2 by their own satisfaction with the relationships to their fathers. The self-assessed self-satisfaction was the least stable self-concept measure. Apparently, **during school-to-work transition, self-satisfaction undergoes a shift in its meaning and constituents.** For schoolchildren, parents' approval (also expressed in parents' satisfaction with relationship to children) may be important. After leaving school, it may be more important to what extent fathers guide and accompany their offsprings, as is indicated in adolescents' satisfaction with fathers.
- On the contrary, the more specific **sense of familial competence** was very stable and kept its predictors over time. For this part of adolescents' self-concept, **parents' approval constantly was important, as was the own satisfaction with the relationships to both parents.**

- The **parents seemed to have only limited insight in their offsprings' self-satisfaction.** They did not notice the shift in its predictors but constantly assessed their children higher self-satisfaction when the parents were satisfied with them.
- Marital satisfaction correlated with adolescents' satisfaction with fathers but not with mothers. Only fathers changed their assessments of adolescents self-satisfaction according to their marital quality at time 1. Possibly, **fathers are more strongly influenced by marital quality than mothers in their behavior and attitudes towards children.** In an extreme form, this came to light in a comparison of father-child relationships in intact vs. divorced families where divorced fathers to a high degree lost their importance for their children in adolescence and young adulthood (Masche, 1999b).

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